

# Health Trends



A Quarterly Newsletter for the New Mexico VA Health Care System ■ VISN 18

## The Choice Act: Finding Answers Online

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) goal is to provide timely, high-quality health care for Veterans. A major step toward that goal was the passage of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA), which went into effect on November 5, 2014.

As reported in the last two issues of *Health Trends*, among the key features of VACAA is the Veterans Choice Program. If you've been enrolled in VA health care on or before August 1, 2014, the Choice Program gives you the option of receiving non-VA health care under certain conditions, rather than having to wait for a VA appointment or to travel to a VA facility. Please keep in mind that using this program does not impact your existing VA health care, or any other VA benefit, in any way.

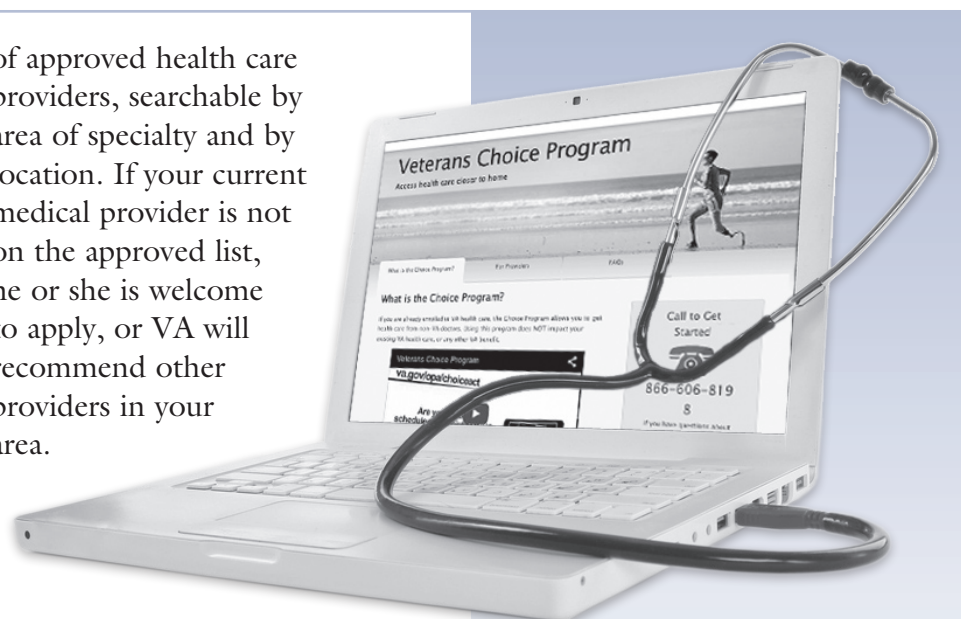
The VA's focus is on efficient and effective implementation of this new law. Because of its many features and benefits, the [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/) website has been updated to provide clear instructions on how to access the program. It includes a detailed list

of approved health care providers, searchable by area of specialty and by location. If your current medical provider is not on the approved list, he or she is welcome to apply, or VA will recommend other providers in your area.

On the website, there are easy to follow instructions on determining your eligibility for the program, on selecting providers, and on making appointments. You'll also find information on other health care related topics, including:

- obtaining prescriptions;
- non-service connected care;
- health insurance coverage and copayments; and
- emergency care.

Caring for our Veterans, their survivors, and dependents continues to be our goal. We are enhancing our health care system



and improving service delivery to better serve Veterans and set the course for long-term excellence and reform. VA has made much progress since VACAA's passage, but more work remains to expand timely access to high-quality health care for Veterans.

Again, our focus and priority is on the efficient and effective implementation of this highly complex law. If, after visiting the website, you have questions or would like more information, please call the Choice Program Call Center at 866-606-8198. ■

## Direct Express® Debit MasterCard® Program

Over the next few months, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) will be issuing debit cards for VA payments to Veterans who choose not to participate in Electronic Fund Transfer (EFT) direct deposits to their financial institutions. As part of the process, the VHA Office of Finance has established a relationship with Comerica Bank to offer a Direct Express® Debit MasterCard®.

This change should improve delivery of Veteran payments, for those now receiving paper checks, by making payments faster, safer, more convenient and reliable. Such payments include travel reimbursement and compensated work therapy pay.

Veterans who have declined to enroll in the EFT Direct Deposit program, and are currently receiving either cash or check payments, are encouraged to

enroll in the Direct Express® Debit MasterCard® program. The benefits include the following:

- **It's Safe and Secure:** There's no risk of lost or stolen checks and funds are FDIC insured up to the maximum amount allowed by law.
- **It's Easy:** Veterans can access their money faster because their money is automatically posted to their account or debit card each month. Deposits will be available within 24-48 hours.
- **It's Convenient:** Veterans can make purchases anywhere MasterCard® is accepted and get cash at retail locations, banks and credit unions, and ATMs throughout the world.
- **It Provides More Control:** There are no monthly fees or overdraft fees and no waiting for checks to arrive.



- **It's efficient and cost effective:** This is a reliable method for Veterans to receive payments and is less costly for the government than using paper checks.

A toll-free number has been established to assist Veterans and their families with the process and answer any specific questions. The number is 1-800-333-1795.

VHA Facility Business Office point(s) of contact will be identified locally to assist Veterans with questions and registration. For online information and assistance, visit [www.usdirectexpress.com](http://www.usdirectexpress.com). ■

## PTSD: Raising Awareness – Providing the Tools

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a condition that can impact anyone who goes through a traumatic event, such as combat, assault or disaster. Because America's military personnel are subjected to such conditions regularly, the VA is actively involved in not only raising awareness of PTSD but in developing the tools needed to diagnose and treat it.

One important tool is PTSD Coach, a mobile app which was created by the VA's National Center for PTSD, in partnership with the Department of Defense's National Center for Telehealth and Technology. The free PTSD Coach app, available both for iPhone and Android, can help you learn about and manage symptoms that often occur after trauma.

### App features include:

- Reliable information on PTSD and treatments that work;
- Tools for screening and tracking your symptoms;
- Convenient, easy-to-use tools to help you handle stress symptoms;
- Direct links to support and help.

# Advance Directives – What You Should Know

**A**s a VA patient, you have a say in the health care you receive. When you're ill, your doctor should explain what treatments there are, so you can decide which may be best for you. But if you were too ill to understand your choices or talk to your doctor:

- **Who would you want to make decisions for you?**
- **What type of health care would you want?**
- **What health care wouldn't you want?**

They're important questions. That's why VA wants you to know about a legal form you can complete. It's called an advance directive, which helps your doctors and family members understand your wishes about medical and mental health care. It can help them decide about treatments if you're unable to decide for yourself. There are two types

of advance directives: durable power of attorney for health care and living will.

The durable power of attorney lets you name an adult you trust to make health care decisions for you if you can't make them yourself – your “health care agent.” He or she will have the legal right to make decisions, should know your values, and be willing to serve as your agent. If you don't choose one, your doctor will – in the following order: legal guardian (if you have one), spouse, adult child, parent, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, or close friend. If none is available, your health care team, or a court, will make decisions for you in accordance with VA policy.

A living will states what kinds of treatments you would or wouldn't want if you become ill and can't decide for yourself. It can help your health care agent and your doctor make decisions the way you want. Without a living will, decisions will be made for you based on what's known about you in general and about your values.

Most of the time, your health care agent must follow your living will, and should always try to respect your wishes. Due to unforeseen circumstances, your agent may



sometimes have to interpret your wishes. In a VA advance directive, you can state exactly how much discretion, if any, your agent may have. The directive helps protect your right to make your own choices, and is used only when you aren't able to make decisions yourself.

You may change or cancel your advance directive at any time, and should review it periodically, especially if there's a change in your health. Share your new directive with your VA team, family members and other loved ones.

To complete your advance directive, fill out VA Form 10-0137, “VA Advance Directive: Durable Power of Attorney and Living Will,” or use any valid state form. Talk to a health care professional at your local VA health care facility, and/or your spiritual advisor or attorney. Your VA health care team can make your advance directive part of your medical record. ■

Together with professional medical treatment, PTSD Coach provides you with resources you can trust. It has already been downloaded more than 100,000 times in countries around the world.

More information about PTSD and PTSD Coach is available online at [www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/cope/index.asp](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/cope/index.asp). ■



## Fall 2015

If you are a Veteran who is currently smoking and would like to learn ways to stop this habit, help is available through the New Mexico VA Health Care System. Please contact your primary care provider and request a consultation to the Smoking Cessation Program. **HealthTrends** is designed to provide general health and wellness information and news about services provided by VISN 18. **HealthTrends** is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your health care provider.

### To Change Your Address

Contact Benefits and Eligibility at **505-265-1711, ext. 2741**. Out-of-town patients, please call **800-465-8262, ext. 2741**.

### Patient Concerns or Issues

please contact our patient advocates at **505-265-1711, ext. 2612 or 2686**. Out-of-town patients, please call **800-465-8262, ext. 2612 or 2686**.

[www.albuquerque.va.gov](http://www.albuquerque.va.gov)

## New Mexico VA Health Care System

1501 San Pedro Drive, S.E.  
Albuquerque, NM 87108-5153

# HealthTrends

## Helping Vets Quit Smoking

The New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS) offers medications, counseling, education, and other support that can help Veterans quit smoking.

“Nicotine is the most addictive substance known to mankind,” said Dr. Brian Kersh, a clinical psychologist and Health Behavior Coordinator for the New Mexico VA Health Care System (NMVAHCS). “As a result, quitting smoking is one of the toughest things people can do,” he said.

The VA offers a set of “tools” to help Veterans quit smoking. These tools include behavioral counseling and medication, such as Zyban® or Chantix®, to reduce nicotine craving. Counseling can be as informal as a series of phone calls. These are basically 30-minute-or-less calls, where Veterans talk one-on-one with a tobacco cessation counselor.

“That counselor also coordinates with the pharmacist in our program

or the Veteran’s primary care provider to help them get medications,” Kersh said.

Another component of the VA’s Tobacco Cessation Program is a drop-in group medical program, known as DIGMA. Veterans can attend every Wednesday at 1 p.m. in Room 301 in Building 1 of the Raymond G. Murphy VA Medical Center in Albuquerque. The group is co-led by a psychologist and a pharmacist to help address both psychological factors, such as habit, and physiological factors, such as nicotine addiction, around quitting.

“We’re there to provide whatever assistance the Veterans need,” Kersh said. “That may be getting them started on a medication. Our program pharmacist can meet with group participants on a one-to-one basis, evaluate them, and prescribe appropriate medication. While the pharmacist is doing that, the rest of



us will talk about some behavioral strategies around quitting.”

Counseling, whether on the phone or in person, is critical to quitting. Counseling often focuses on problem solving skills, teaching people how to manage triggers that lead to smoking, deal with the cravings, and handle those “temptation situations.”

Veterans interested in participating or who just need more information can call Thomas Kist at (505) 265-1711, ext. 4388. Those with additional questions also can call Dr. Brian Kersh at 265-1711, ext. 5669. ■